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National Safety Month: Building safety culture

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Safety culture — the sum of a workforce's beliefs, perceptions and attitudes about safety and their leaders' management of risk — is a critical, albeit nebulous, part of loss prevention for both the Army and private industry.

Brig. Gen. Andrew C. Hilmes, commander, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center and Command Sgt. Maj. William L. Gardner II have made it their mission to clear confusion and help leaders at all levels build effective, proactive safety cultures within their formations.

"Throughout my career, I've found that command climate and safety culture are intricately linked and absolutely vital to unit success," Hilmes said. "I've been fortunate to have great leaders in that respect, and it's something we have the ability to pay forward across the command spectrum."

Hilmes and Gardner travel to installations across the United States to discuss Army mishap trends, risk management programs and safety culture with new and aspiring leaders at venues including the brigade and battalion Pre-Command Course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; various Captains Career Courses at the Army's training posts; and the Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.

The first step they advise for growing safety culture is getting to know the unit's safety professionals during their command onboarding.

"Commanders and subordinate leaders have an invaluable asset in their safety professionals," Gardner said. "At the brigade and garrison levels, they'll be civilians who bring continuity to risk management. Below that, you have trained additional duty safety officers or, in aviation units, aviation safety officers to help guide you through where the unit stands on safety issues."

From there, incoming leaders can evaluate existing safety culture by reviewing the unit's Army Readiness Assessment Program scores, a survey tool required at battalion level to gauge safety climate and culture.

"ARAP is really the single-most important indicator of safety posture," Hilmes explained. "Data have consistently shown that units in the bottom 25 percent of ARAP scores account for about 50 percent of all Class A mishaps and fatalities across the Army, both on and off duty."

Other advice includes evaluating driver training and licensing programs to ensure currency with the newly updated Army Regulation 600-55, The Army Driver and Operator Standardization Program;

issuing commander's standing safety guidance; assessing unit risk reduction processes; conveying who's empowered to curtail or modify training; being engaged and present throughout the risk management and mission planning processes; ensuring continuous safety touch points through safety professionals and awards programs; analyzing and sharing "near miss" information; and emphasizing rehearsals for every mission.

"Each of those points has a cumulative effect on safety culture," Hilmes said. "Most on-duty Soldier fatalities occur in Army vehicles and during mission transitions such as movement to or from a range, not the decisive operation itself.

"Engaged, knowledgeable leaders at every phase of the mission who continue that engagement off duty make a tremendous difference in Soldier safety."

Gardner noted that the Army's 330,000-plus civilian workforce is a vital element of safety culture as well.

"Civilian employees certainly have a role in safety culture," he said. "They provide the stability our Army needs to operate seamlessly and often are the backbone of existing safety programs."

Encouraging civilian safety participation isn't really any different than for Soldiers, Hilmes said.

"It's the same principles: valuing civilian employees' inputs in safety and health decisions, promoting reporting of near misses, sharing relevant safety information and making sure their voices are heard without fear of retaliation," he said. "These all help foster positive risk management programs and safety cultures."

Ultimately, both Hilmes and Gardner agreed the commander, and by extension his or her subordinate leaders, are responsible for setting, maintaining and emulating expected safety standards.

"Leadership communicates through both action and words their expectations for safety climate and culture," Hilmes said. "They have to make sure it's the right message, all the time."

For more information on safety culture, ARAP and the overarching Army Safety Program, visit https://safety.army.mil.

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Note: The USACRC will release one themed article and other media per week throughout the month of June in support of National Safety Month. Be sure to check the website regularly for updates.